



Literacy and your health

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

“Four out of ten British

Columbians do not have the literacy skills they need to achieve their goals, to function and thrive in the modern

economy, and to develop their knowledge and potential.”

LiteracyBC’s publication, “Literacy matters for BC” is blunt in its assessment of the abilities of about a million of us in this province. The Canadian Public Health Association is equally concerned with our abilities in ‘health literacy,’ something we all need to make the most of the health care and information available to us.

The irony of writing to discuss literacy problems is not lost on us, however, these ideas are valuable because they can point out the challenges for some of the people around us, whether family, friends or clients.

Traditionally, the concept of literacy has been very narrowly defined as the ability to read and write. It

was something we learned in school as discrete skills in themselves. However, this tunnel-vision approach no

longer works. The complexity and pace of life today demands a new definition. A good one is that used by Literacy Now Sunshine Coast: “those foundational skills and competencies that we need to fully participate in social, economic, family and community life.” This definition is much more consistent with reality.

In 2003, detailed research into our literacy skills was published as the International Adult Literacy & Skills Survey (IALSS). It measured Canadians’ ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, work and in the community. That is where the 40% figure comes from in our opening statistic.

The IALSS grouped scores into five levels. Level 1 includes the people who cannot read at all or have

serious problems doing so. They generally know they have a problem. Level 2 literacy includes people with limited skill who can deal well only with simple material very clearly laid out. They often do not recognize their limitations.

Level 3 literacy has been verified as the minimum proficiency to fully participate and succeed in the modern, knowledge-based society. Levels 4 and 5 describe people with higher level skills, and who also have strategies for dealing with more complex materials.

IALSS found that a large proportion of Canadians scored below level 3. Why does this matter? First, the ability to understand and use written material is vital to health, work, education, training, child-rearing... in other words, most of life. Consider a simple example relating to health: Working aged Canadians with lower self-rated health also had lower average literacy. Alternately, people with the lowest health literacy scores were three times more likely to report being in poor

health.

Literacy is also linked to income levels, themselves linked to health as a determinant of health.

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As income levels rise, so too does health. On the job, literacy is a key to training and retention of knowledge. For those not working, lower levels of literacy mean fewer job, education and training opportunities. Not only are people scoring at level 1 and 2 not as likely to have a job, they also have a poorer chance of getting or keeping one.

Literacy matters in so many ways. Community programs such as those promoted or offered by local literacy groups are an important part of the solution. To learn more about the challenges, and the opportunities to participate, visit [LiteracyBC](http://www.literacybc.ca) online at www.literacybc.ca.

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